

INTRODUCTION

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In *Existentialism and Contemporary Cinema: A Beauvoirian Perspective* we aim to re-open a dialogue between Simone de Beauvoir's philosophy and film studies which she herself inaugurated. In so doing, we offer a range of new Beauvoirian perspectives on the study of contemporary cinema and demonstrate the relevance of her thought to cinematic culture. In the chapters that follow this Introduction, key Beauvoirian themes and ideas will thus be brought into sharper focus through their application in a variety of ways to the analyses of films and their stars.

Simone de Beauvoir (1908–86) is most well known as the author of *The Second Sex* (1949), widely acknowledged as the foundational text of second wave feminism, and as an existentialist philosopher and literary writer of the French post-war period. However, her work, until this present volume, has not readily or often been associated with film studies.¹ This is paradoxical when it is recognised that Beauvoir was the first feminist thinker to inaugurate the concept of the gendered 'othering' gaze – a *sine qua non* of subsequent second-wave Anglophone feminist film theory.² Moreover, other concepts associated with Beauvoirian existentialism such as ambiguity, gendered alienation, situated freedom, woman as absolute Other, and the synergistic nexus of embodiment, temporality and agency are highly suggestive for reading screen culture as evidenced by many of the essays in this volume.

Despite Beauvoir's frequently proclaimed faith in the value of literature, language and philosophy as a means to know and interpret the world, her philosophical and personal writings contain abundant references to her cinema-going and cinematic interests. Beauvoir was an avid but not uncritical fan of 'le septième art', as it is known in France. She explained this interest in a rather phenomenological and ironically somewhat psychoanalytical description of her own role as a film spectator in the fourth volume of her memoirs, *All Said and Done*:

When I go into a cinema, I leave my actual self at the door; and although my past is certainly there behind me as I react to the film, it is not there as a conscious entity

and my only project is to watch the scenes that go by before my eyes. I accept them as true, and I am not allowed to intervene in anyway; my praxis is paralysed and in some cases this paralysis emphasises the unbearable nature of the pictures, while in others it makes them enchanting. Sitting there in front of the screen, I surrender myself entirely, as I do in dreams; and in this case too, it is visual images that hold me captive – that is why cinema awakens dream-like echoes in each beholder. If a film affects me deeply, it does so either because it stirs unformulated memories or because it brings unspoken hopes back to life.

(Beauvoir 1977: 195–96)

Beauvoir explains here the fascination cinema held for her by describing the immediate power of visual images to captivate and activate the viewer's imaginary life. Distinct from the process of reading books, watching films induces a powerful dream-like state in her because of its altered temporality and relationship to the imagination; it involves her instantly and entirely: affectively, somatically, intellectually, and psychically. Film spectatorship, as she describes it, activates unconscious psychic fragments of the past and mobilises them into present lived experience. As such, then, Beauvoir recognised the power and influence of cinema as it was emerging as the increasingly dominant cultural discourse of the post-war period.

Her interest in cinema dates back to her earliest cinema outings during her student years alone or with her cousin Jacques to see art-house and early Hollywood films at the Studio des Ursulines, the Vieux-Colombier and Ciné Latin in Paris (Beauvoir 1963: 241). Rejecting the contemporary bourgeois disdain for cinema in the 1920s as 'entertainment for housemaids', Beauvoir embraced the cinematic avant-garde (Beauvoir 1965: 48). She then 'discovered' popular cinema in the form of cowboy films and whodunits in 1929 with Jean-Paul Sartre and, with Paul Nizan, they even made and acted in short amateur films together. In the 1930s, Hollywood cinema dominated their viewing interests; first, because it was a means to know America and, second, because they found crime and gangster movies more intellectually engaging than the crude realism of much French cinema of the era. They deplored the 'flat dialogue, insipid photography and actors talking in artificial voices' in French films, with the exception of work by Prévert, Carné and Vigo (Beauvoir 1963: 323). They initially lamented the arrival of the 'talkies' yet welcomed Chaplin's non-realist use of sound in *Modern Times* – a film which would lend its name to *Les Temps Modernes*, the journal they would later set up in 1945. A new generation of film directors such as Delannoy, Daquin and L'Herbier then drew Beauvoir and Sartre back to French cinema in the early 1940s and world cinema remained an enduring source of theoretical reflection, cultural interest and entertainment for Beauvoir until the 1970s, and constituted a rich corpus of source material for her own writing and philosophy.

Before looking in more detail at the role of cinema among Beauvoir's theoretical interests, it is useful to note the broader influence of existentialism on cinema more generally.

Beauvoir and Sartre are of course synonymous with French atheistic existential phenomenology, one of the leading philosophies of the post-war period in continental Europe with diverse resonances across the world. In its heyday in the 1940s and 1950s, existentialism shares a rich cinematic tradition with classic French cinematic movements such as ‘the new wave’ and Hollywood genres such as ‘*film noir*’ in the ways it influenced international directors and avant-garde filmmaking over the latter half of the twentieth century. The phenomenological focus of existentialism on temporally situated ‘lived experience’ and its recognition of the specular dynamic of self and other relationships are highly relevant to the study of cinema. As early as 1931, Sartre delivered a lecture on ‘l’art cinématographique’ to students in Le Havre which coincided with the period during which he began writing the first draft of *Nausea*, published in 1938. In the lecture, he argued that cinema reflected the spirit of the contemporary age and posed a challenge to the bourgeois hierarchies of theatre and its formal emphasis on the unity of action. Cinema was an authentic art form, in Sartre’s view, because it constituted a visual manifestation of the irreversibility of time and an insight into the totalising process of human destiny. These proto-existentialist ideas were further developed in the existential philosophy that he and Beauvoir would later set out, according to which temporally situated existence precedes essence (Sartre 1970: 549). At its height in the 1940s and 1950s, existentialism influenced classic French cinematic movements such as ‘the new wave’ and Hollywood genres such as ‘*film noir*’ and in turn shaped the work of international directors and avant-garde filmmaking throughout the latter half of the twentieth century.

In *Film Theory, An Introduction*, Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake analyse the politics of film (2006: 1–31). They see the politics of gender becoming important from the late 1970s onwards, displacing the previous focus on the politics of class (Lapsley and Westlake 2006: 23). The original aim of this first wave of Anglophone feminist film criticism was to establish feminist methodologies for interpreting film culture. This was firstly achieved by denouncing the patriarchal ideology which underpinned the greater part of Hollywood’s output, secondly by debating whether the few films which starred women protagonists perpetuated stereotypes or challenged them, contributing to a ‘redefinition of femininity’ (Lapsley and Westlake 2006: 24), and, thirdly, by recovering a lost history of women’s filmmaking as ‘writers, editors and above all directors’ (ibid.). By then, cinema imperatively needed to ‘break with received notions of femininity and depict women truthfully’ (Lapsley and Westlake 2006: 24–25). If we substitute ‘truthfully’ for ‘authentically’, this could almost be the definition of Beauvoir’s project in *The Second Sex*. Ensuing gender political debates in cinema then sought to address notions of female specificity and essence, adopting instead the notion of ‘femininity as a construct’ (Lapsley and Westlake 2006: 25). The gender political content of film was not the only realm to be investigated: the formal properties of film came under the spotlight. In this respect, Beauvoir proved to be a pioneer with her essay on ‘Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome’, published in 1959, which critiqued

form as well as content.³ Subsequent Anglophone feminist film critics turned their attention to genre cinema. For instance, melodrama, which had often been seen to perpetuate stereotypes of women, could be read as subversive, as could *film noir*, as a means of signifying the return of the repressed (Harvey 1978: 33). Avant-garde filming practice was also encouraged as ‘a truly progressive cinema would need to break with all existing modes of representation’ (Lapsley and Westlake 2006: 29). Instead of suppressing gender difference in order not to sustain male dominance, there was a need for the ‘delineation and specification of difference as liberating, as offering the only possibility of radical change’ (Doane, Mellencamp and Williams 1984: 12).

In France, women filmmakers and screenplay writers such as Agnès Varda and Marguerite Duras were pioneers in their displacement of the male objectifying gaze and their gender political focus on the representation of women’s experience in films such as Alain Resnais’s *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) and Varda’s *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962), even if feminist film theory originating within France has developed only recently and intermittently.⁴ As French women’s writing developed under the influence of second-wave feminism, the avant-garde practice of ‘écriture féminine’ would constitute a challenge to phallogocentric literature and further influence the theory and practice of women’s filmmaking.⁵

Published only four years after the end of the Second World War, *The Second Sex* was an act of Promethean audacity – a theft of Olympian fire – from which there was no turning back ... it marks the place in history where an enlightenment begins’ (Thurman 2010). An aspect of this enlightenment was quite simply a new way of ‘seeing gender’. Bhabha states the originality of Beauvoir’s thought when he writes: ‘The power of Beauvoir’s thinking and feelings lies in her ability to articulate – with a certain ambiguity – the anxiety of the psychic landscape with the agency of the political terrain’ (Bhabha 2010: 1). In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir deploys key existentialist notions such as the interrelationship of freedom and facticity (or the ‘given’ features of our existence which we have not chosen); transcendence and immanence; being-for-others; existential ambiguity; alienation; authenticity; bad faith (or the denial of our radical freedom) to analyse how woman becomes the ‘absolute Other’ in western patriarchal society. *The Second Sex* is divided into two volumes: the first is entitled ‘Facts and Myths’; the second, ‘Lived Experience’, reflecting Beauvoir’s phenomenological approach to the question of women’s oppression.⁶ She demonstrates how femininity has been conceptualised and how women ‘become’ relative beings in a patriarchal society. Her main argument is that throughout history, man has assumed the position of universal subject, and woman is positioned as relative ‘Other’ or object of male consciousness. Patriarchal society is consequently structured to perpetuate these sexually differentiated roles which are detrimental to women leading autonomous and fulfilling lives on terms of equality with men. The persistence of patriarchal ideology throughout history has enabled men to assume that they have a right to maintain women in a subordinate state and women have internalised and

adapted to this oppressed state. Beauvoir argues that both men and women perpetuate patriarchy, which is why it is able to continue. Sexual oppression continues because, according to Beauvoir, gender roles are learned from the very earliest age and reinforced perpetually. The famous phrase that opens the second volume of *The Second Sex* – ‘One is not born but rather becomes a woman’ – constitutes a rejection of the patriarchal notion that there is a female nature or essence. Here, Beauvoir applies existentialism’s notion of ‘existence precedes essence’ to women’s situation, arguing that fixed or determining male or female identities are a *product* not a cause of patriarchal society’s organisation as a sexual apartheid or segregation, rooted in men’s and women’s different biological make-up and reproductive roles. This results in woman’s reproductive capacity being valued more than her intellectual development or autonomy, so that society’s laws, institutions, belief systems and cultures reflect this view of women’s secondary role in society.

A common misreading of *The Second Sex* has been that Beauvoir does not recognise sexual difference and thinks that women should become like men in their quest for freedom. In fact, Beauvoir does recognise sexual difference but does not accept that the deterministic valuing of these differences between women and men should justify the oppression of women and their status as second-class citizens in patriarchal society. Beauvoir contends instead that gender identity (as any other aspect of identity) is ambiguous and never fixed. In patriarchal society, however, women learn to become alienated in their body and sexed identity and the ‘gendered gaze’ plays a key role in this process of alienation, as will be explained below. Marriage and motherhood are consequently deemed to be the most important roles for women in society and their professional roles and opportunities have been limited as a result. Throughout history, most women have adapted to this second-class status which has encouraged their ‘inauthenticity’ to a lesser or greater extent. Beauvoir argues that the way forward for women is to pursue economic autonomy through independent work and through a socialist organisation of society which (in the late 1940s) she believed would favour women’s emancipation and autonomy.

In *The Second Sex*, there are several references to Hollywood stars and films which are used by Beauvoir to illustrate certain of her arguments concerning myth and patriarchal hegemony in practice. For example, in the ‘Myths’ section of Volume I, she highlights the negative stereotyping of the ‘femme fatale’ and ‘the vamp’ in Hollywood cinema as responsible for perpetuating the myth that free women are a danger to society (Beauvoir 2009: 213). Further examples to support her arguments about myth are drawn from Orson Welles’s *Citizen Kane* (1941) and Edmund Goulding’s *The Razor’s Edge* (1946). These films are cited by Beauvoir as examples of ‘the Cinderella myth’ whereby a wealthy male benefactor ‘rescues’ a woman from danger and ensures her enslavement by constructing himself as her unique destiny (Beauvoir 2009: 207). In Volume II, in appraising the culture of female self-beautification, Beauvoir astutely notes that ‘the Hollywood star triumphs over nature but she finds herself a passive

object in the producer's hands', as she would later argue in relation to the depiction of women in French new wave films such as Bardot in Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt* (1963) (Beauvoir 2009: 591). Indeed, it is in *The Second Sex* that Beauvoir can be said to inaugurate feminist film theory by (i) establishing a synthetic methodology which, combining concepts from Hegelianism, Marxism, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, anthropology, ontology and ethics, analyses how woman becomes the absolute Other in western patriarchal societies through an ideological privileging of the heterospecular patriarchal economy and (ii) citing cinema as one of several cultural means through which this oppression of women is embedded and perpetuated in society through institutional, mythological and individual practices.

A crucial feature of Beauvoir's inaugural contribution to feminist film theory is, as noted above, her concept of the gendered 'othering' gaze. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir gives a gender political twist to the Sartrean theory of the look which passes between self and other (itself adapted from the moment of 'recognition' in Hegel's master-slave dialectic). As Sartre observes in *Being and Nothingness*: 'The look of the other' is a fundamental aspect of existentialist philosophy; it is the way in which the other is immediately present to us as the transcendence of our transcendence (Sartre 1958: 252–302). The look is both a literal and metaphorical ideological phenomenon and in *The Second Sex* Beauvoir shows how woman's transcendence can be halted by the patriarchal gaze. She also draws on Jacques Lacan's highly influential account of the Mirror Stage, according to which the infant encounters its alter ego in the mirror, by looking at him- or herself and by the process of him- or herself being reflected back by the other's mirroring, identity-mediating gaze. Through a process of identification with the mirror image, the child's ego identity is formed, which provides an illusory sense of mastery over a fragmented bodily experience. Yet the ego is the result of misrecognition and an alienation that, according to Beauvoir, is experienced differently by boys and girls in patriarchal society, as Moi has discussed (Moi 2008: 176–184). Experiencing a perpetual tension between their transcendence and immanence, girls are acculturated towards passivity and immanence in order to comply with their status as absolute Other in patriarchal society: 'For woman there is, from the start, a conflict between her autonomous existence and her "being-other"; she is taught that to please, she must try to please, she must make herself an object; she must therefore renounce her autonomy. She is treated like a living doll and freedom is denied her' (Beauvoir 2009: 305).

Women do not enjoy the same physical freedoms as men: 'If they wander the streets, they are stared at, accosted ... and they will be insulted or followed or approached' (Beauvoir 2009: 358). Women accordingly learn that 'she will not gain value in the eyes of males by increasing her human worth, but by modelling herself on their dreams' (Beauvoir 2009: 358). Hence in her theory of the gendered 'othering' gaze, Beauvoir adds the Hegelian moment of recognition between self and other (constituted by the look) to Lacan's concept of the founding of subjectivity in alienation and misrecognition in the Mirror

Stage and applies this synthesis to her theorisation of woman's subjectivity in patriarchal society as the absolute Other.

Objectified as man's 'Other', women are hence seen but their voices are unheard. Learning to internalise the patriarchal gaze and to become alienated in their bodies, Beauvoir shows how women learn to become narcissistic and to accept their secondary status in the eyes of the male other. Narcissism is an aspect of women's alienation whereby they take their self as an absolute end; the intersubjective possibilities of the gaze are in effect sacrificed to the delusory 'cult of self' through which woman's transcendence is turned away from the world and back upon itself. Hence, as Beauvoir explains in *The Second Sex*, women's alienated situation in patriarchal society is maintained by this complex specular economy, which has been a key focus for feminist film theory, to which we will now turn.

For students and scholars of feminist film studies, the notion of the 'gendered gaze' is more usually associated with the work of leading feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey and her contemporaries. In a more explicitly psychoanalytical discussion than Beauvoir's, Mulvey described the gendered gaze in her groundbreaking 1975 essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema': 'In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female ... in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*' (Mulvey 1975: 6–18).

Early Anglophone feminist film critics such as Mulvey and Claire Johnston drew on continental philosophy, psychoanalysis, anthropology, and political and linguistic theory as it was circulating in France in the 1970s. Their focus was to analyse the patriarchal codes and structures underpinning filmic representations of women. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir similarly drew on a complex synthesis of continental philosophy, social and political theory, as noted above. But her work was only partially taken up by Anglophone materialist feminism prior to the 1990s due to Beauvoir's methodology being rooted in Franco-Germanic existential phenomenology, and because *The Second Sex* was only available in an abridged and inaccurate translation which misrepresented its philosophical content and sophistication.⁷ Moreover, *The Second Sex* has had a complex history of reception in the respective fields of French and Anglo-American feminist theory. At times, it has been seen as remote from post-1968 feminist debates in France and how those debates have subsequently circulated within Anglo-American feminism. These debates were viewed as being predominantly concerned with psychoanalytic and linguistic approaches to sexual difference and hence not concerned with the same kinds of questions as Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, even though her work still bore strong affinities with French materialist feminism.⁸

Despite Beauvoir's important feminist critique of psychoanalysis in *The Second Sex* and her brief recourse to Lacan's work, her overall stance towards psychoanalysis is certainly ambivalent. This distanced her work from that of

early Anglophone feminist film critics such as Mulvey. As Judith Mayne has argued in a review of the discipline of feminist film theory from 1975 to 1985, Mulvey ‘postulate[d] psychoanalysis as a privileged mode of inquiry for feminism and cinema, a postulation based on the assumption that cinema is, in its very essence, a soul mate to psychoanalysis’.⁹ As Beauvoir’s methodology in her subsequent essay on Bardot showed, she did not share Mulvey’s confidence in psychoanalysis as a useful theoretical tool for the feminist study of film.

A further point of neglected dialogue between Beauvoir and 1970s feminist film theorists was her pioneering use of her friend Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist anthropology in *The Second Sex* to analyse myths of women prevalent in patriarchal society. Her interest in structuralist anthropology was nonetheless shared by Johnston and other feminist film scholars from the mid-1970s onwards. Johnston in particular is judged by Shohini Chaudhuri to have ‘provided the groundwork for the feminist analysis of Woman as a “sign” signifying the myths of patriarchal discourse’, despite Beauvoir’s earlier work in this area.¹⁰ Johnston and other feminist film theorists had turned not to Beauvoir but instead to Roland Barthes’s later semiotic analysis of myths in popular culture to deconstruct the mythic qualities of film and its ideological investment in sexism. Writing of myths of women in cinema, Johnston wrote in 1973: ‘Myth transmits and transforms that ideology of sexism and renders it invisible’, strikingly echoing Beauvoir’s analyses of myth in *The Second Sex* (Johnston 1973: 32).

Beauvoir’s sole essay of film criticism is of particular interest to feminist film studies although it has not been as widely cited as it merits.¹¹ In ‘Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome’, written originally for *Esquire* magazine, Beauvoir further developed her ideological interest in cinema, drawing on her work on women and myth in *The Second Sex*. In common with later feminist film theory, Beauvoir explicitly recognises in her essay on Bardot that film is as complicit as any other cultural discourse in positioning woman as absolute Other and yet she also identifies the subversive feminist potential of the star and film spectators in their respective processes of existential becoming. Published in 1959, Beauvoir’s essay is pioneering because it critiques both cinematic form and content as well as analysing Bardot’s particular brand of stardom. Already in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir had noted how fashion could serve to deprive the female Hollywood star from embodied transcendence (Beauvoir 2009: 182). Yet she saw that it could also be used subversively to connote independence and rebellion as in the 1938 film, *Jezebel*, in which Bette Davis scandalised mid-nineteenth century Louisiana society by wearing a red dress to the most important ball of the season to revenge herself on her fiancé for his neglect (Beauvoir 2009: 588). In her essay on Bardot, Beauvoir analyses how the young Bardot inaugurates literally a new embodiment of the old myth of ‘the eternal feminine’ in Roger Vadim’s *And Woman ... Was Created* (1956). Set in St Tropez, it depicts Juliette (played by Bardot), a highly-sexualised 18-year-old, who is the focus of an older man’s obsession. He acts as her protector, although he plans to marry her off to a man she does not love. The viewer is positioned to

identify with the gaze of the older man that consumes and polices the body of Bardot, which is 'always there to be speculated', as Hayward notes (1993: 177). Bardot pouts and dances her way around St Tropez, and the film's 'highlight' for Bardot fans is the final sequence of mambo dancing which, shot in a bar in close-up from the waist down, seems to frame Bardot's body as an object to be consumed by an implied heterosexual male voyeur.

According to Beauvoir, Bardot's incarnation of the myth of 'the eternal feminine' was less successful in France than in America because American men were less threatened by Bardot's sexually liberated behaviour. Although Beauvoir does not mention it, it is also worth noting the impact of the Hays Code which censored what could be shown on US cinema screens from 1930 until 1968. The code was losing its force by the 1950s and hence Bardot's emancipated sexuality and exoticism must have appeared highly erotic to US audiences.¹² Indeed, although Bardot was a major success in the US and, as Beauvoir terms it, as important a French 'export' as Renault cars, Bardot was subjected to a volley of accusations of immorality levelled at her in the French press. In her essay, Beauvoir was interested in the disruptive erotic power of Bardot as a combination of 'femme fatale' and 'nymphette' who is not so much immoral as amoral. She was also intrigued by Bardot's liberated and sensual style of embodiment which contrasted with the restrained stance of other film actresses. This recalls her phenomenological analyses of the relationship between gendered embodiment and space in the second volume of *The Second Sex*. Although Vadim, director of *And Woman ... Was Created*, positioned the spectator implicitly as a heterosexual male 'voyeur', Beauvoir reads Bardot both on and off screen as resistant to being positioned as the fetishised body-object of the heterosexual male gaze, leaving that category of spectator feeling cheated and vindictive. The male gaze is also frustrated by Vadim's analytical style which fails to render the story or characters at all convincing and heightens the effect of Bardot's 'aggressive' femininity which positions men as erotic objects. This is particularly evident in the well-known 'mambo' sequence in which Bardot dances herself into an erotic trance, intoxicated by her own pleasure in embodiment and oblivious to the reactions of the male onlookers around her. Beauvoir's focus here on Bardot's liberated style of embodiment chimes with her interest in dance as a potential form of embodied existential freedom for women, as evident in episodes from her fictional texts such as *She Came to Stay* (1943), *Les Mandarins* (1954) and *Les Belles Images* (1966).¹³

In this way Beauvoir argues that Bardot achieves erotic embodied agency within the film's diegesis at various points, even if it is an agency limited by Vadim's direction. In her essay, Beauvoir is acutely attentive to the politics of the gendered gaze in 1950s cinema and analyses Bardot's on-screen persona alongside the myth of Bardot in contemporary French society. She also establishes a clear feminist methodology for interpreting film culture by exposing patriarchal ideology in the form of myth and analysing how Bardot challenges female stereotypes in cinema. Both of these aims were common to early feminist film criticism of the 1970s.

To consider Beauvoir's importance for film studies in the contemporary period, much of her philosophy remains valuable. While the space limitations of this Introduction mean that we can only indicate some areas of relevance, we observe that her contribution to ethics and phenomenology resonates strongly with the focus on ethics, aesthetics and sense experience in film studies in recent years. The 'phenomenological turn' in film studies which has been taking place since the late 1990s, with its focus on embodied lived experience and the haptic, resonates strikingly with Beauvoirian philosophy, yet again references to her work as an inaugural feminist existential phenomenologist are few within this sub-field of contemporary film studies.¹⁴ Then, the recent trend in French cinema for depicting graphic sexual violence and for rape revenge films made by both female and male directors, such as *La Squalle* (2000), *Irréversible* (2002) and *Baise-moi* (2000), continue to offer fertile ground for the application of Beauvoir's ethics as well as her theory of the gendered gaze. Similarly, her work on ageing in *Old Age* (1970) is a key tool of analysis for film culture in the context of film being a cultural discourse which, necessarily centred on image, has tended to glorify youth and beauty, even if now it is finally turning its attention to the lived situation of the aged against the backdrop of demographically ageing societies across the world.

In the present collection of essays, whilst *The Second Sex* is inevitably a key theoretical resource for many of the contributors, there are also existentialist readings of contemporary films drawing on other works by Beauvoir such as *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), the novels and memoirs, as well as *Old Age* (1970). Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* features prominently in this collection because, as Debra Bergoffen has argued, one sees in this essay Beauvoir's affinity with phenomenology 'as distinct from existentialism' and her explicitly ethical concerns expressed without reference to Jean-Paul Sartre's existential ontology as constituted by *Being and Nothingness* (Bergoffen 1997: 21).¹⁵ William McBride has perhaps the final word on the debate surrounding the mutual influence of Beauvoir and Sartre when he concludes:

Because of her breakthrough insight into the phenomenon of the 'second sex' and its overwhelming importance throughout history and into present times, it is not unthinkable to consider [Beauvoir] to have been even more original than [Sartre] and ultimately to have exerted even far greater influence not so much on Sartre, even though that was no doubt significant, but on the development of contemporary human thought itself in our ever more globalized world.

(McBride 2009: 200–1)

By foregrounding the centrality of key themes such as the individual, the gendered gaze, 'situation', freedom, femininity, sexuality, 'ambiguity' and alienation, the chapters in this volume demonstrate the relevance of Beauvoirian existentialism (understood in its broadest sense) to film studies in the postmodern context.

The first three chapters deal with gender relations, from childhood to motherhood, as well as race relations. Emma Wilson investigates the

implications of Beauvoir's account of childhood in passages from *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, *The Second Sex*, the first excised chapter from *She Came to Stay*, and the first section of *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*. Taking Lucile Hadzihalilovic's *Innocence* (2004), a film about an imagined girls' school, as her object of enquiry, Wilson explores the ways in which this contemporary film about girlhood is illuminated by Beauvoir's thinking and yet also opens her ideas to further inquiry. The ethics of the representation of children within audiovisual media and of the positioning of the spectator are also explored. The second chapter by Ursula Tidd deploys Beauvoir's analyses of motherhood and female sexuality in *The Second Sex* and in her essay 'Must We Burn Sade?' to question whether Isabelle Huppert's recent and most unsettling roles offer a new understanding of the dynamics of the maternal bond or whether the mothers depicted are caught up in mere variants of traditional patriarchal roles circumscribed by political and sexual double-standards. The discussion focuses on Raúl Ruiz's *Comedy of Innocence* (2000), Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher* (2001) and Alessandro Capone's *Hidden Love* (2007). In the third chapter, using Claire Denis's *Chocolat* (1988), Jean-Pierre Boulé studies the interaction of three characters: Aimée, the white mother and wife of the colonial administrator; France, her daughter; and Protée, the black servant (called 'the boy'), guided by *The Second Sex*. Boulé's essay charts the relationship between each of these characters, including the *mise-en-scène*, movement and framing of the camera (the look, objectification, (in)visibility) in an attempt to enrich post-colonial readings of the film with an existential feminist reading.

The next four chapters all engage with ethical questions relating to the meaning of existence and its relationship to freedom and responsibility. In chapter four, Connie Mui and Julien Murphy focus on gender relations and a heterosexual couple's relationship in the context of an ethical interrogation of human freedom. They assess Beauvoir's early philosophy of freedom as an ambiguous dialectical interplay between individual choices and social conventions through a critical analysis of the film *Revolutionary Road*, directed by Sam Mendes (2008). They also demonstrate the relevance of Beauvoir's treatment of gender, marriage, love and independence in *The Second Sex* to the dilemmas faced by Frank and April Wheeler in the film. In chapter five, Linnell Secomb reflects on the relationship between Simone de Beauvoir's philosophy, as adumbrated in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex*, and melodrama. Focusing on Todd Haynes's postmodern melodrama *Far From Heaven* (2002) and on its intertext, Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), the chapter analyses the differing depictions of the female experience of love in Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and in these two films. Secomb also compares the melodramatic character formation evident within this text with that in the film melodramas. Finally, the questioning of, and recuperation of, transcendence that emerges in these divergent texts is traced, not only within the content and narrative but also within structure and *mise-en-scène*. In the next chapter, Claire Humphrey studies *La Petite Jérusalem* by Karin Albou (2005) in conjunction with Beauvoir's feminist phenomenology, as set out in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second*

Sex, and haptic cinematography. Beauvoir's perspective highlights the connections between ambiguity, ideology and viewing positions in the experience of watching cinema, in a way which grounds discussion of individual narratives and film aesthetics within a particular social context. Subsequently, Bradley Stephens offers an existentialist analysis of *I ♥ Huckabees* (2004), directed and co-written by David O. Russell, which humorously explores what happens when we seek out a more authentic meaning to our world than consumerist culture offers. The film dramatises the kind of transformative logic that Beauvoir sets out in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Both the film and Beauvoir embrace ambiguity so as to dismantle supposedly unchanging and self-evident ways of being in favour of a more dynamic existence, pertinent to contemporary cultural and political concerns in the twenty-first century.

Chapters eight to ten address the field of gerontology. Michelle Royer opens a dialogue between Beauvoir's existentialist analysis of ageing femininity (*Old Age*) and the screen representation of older women in Yamina Benguigui's *Inch'Allah Sunday* (2001). The contrast between the generations and the break with tradition and imprisonment are translated by the cinematic aesthetics of the film – the music, the *mise-en-scène*, the use of close-up and long shots – providing visual representations of Beauvoir's existentialist concepts. Benguigui's film provides both support for and a critique of Beauvoir's perspective on old age. Oliver Davis then analyses the ageing of heroic American masculinity in Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino* (2008) from the perspectives both of *Old Age* and *The Second Sex*, arguing that Beauvoir's ontology of ageing is premised on the inevitability of violence. Davis plots an exchange between the film, with its presentation of hegemonic masculinity as a learned performance, and Beauvoir's work on ageing and gender which he calls *farfelu* (as 'another queer mode of excess'). His conclusion is that Eastwood and the Beauvoir of *Old Age* stand strong together in unlikely agreement. Next Susan Bainbrigge explores the ways in which a number of Beauvoirian concerns (mid-life crisis, old age and death) are played out in *The Savages* (2007), written and directed by Tamara Jenkins, in terms of both form and content. She argues that the film has at its core universally-recognisable concerns – relationships, ageing and dying – and dramatises existential questions of 'embodied' living and dying that so concerned Simone de Beauvoir (drawing in particular on *Old Age*, *A Very Easy Death* and *The Woman Destroyed*), creating an existentialist framework in dialogue with gerontology and film studies.

In chapter eleven, Kate Ince foregrounds Beauvoir's contribution as a feminist phenomenologist, notably through her concept of the (historical) body as situation. Ince uses Beauvoir's 'Literature and Metaphysics', *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex* to read Sally Potter's films *Orlando* (1992), *The Tango Lesson* (1997) and *Yes* (2005). She explores the suggestive connections between Beauvoir's work and contemporary women's filmmaking, and considers the contribution made by Potter's films – through their emphasis on women's bodily actions, movement, desire and historical experience – to the burgeoning discipline of feminist phenomenology. Thus all of the chapters in their various

ways constitute what Alice Jardine calls in her homage to Beauvoir the exciting research now being undertaken in ‘different epistemological directions ... stepping off from the threshold of Beauvoir’s work’ (Jardine 2010: 69).

As such, then, the collection offers a rich set of resources for Beauvoirian readings of contemporary film and, in so doing, draws on a wide variety of filmic genres, namely: biography, comedy, drama, fiction, music, mystery, romance and thriller; spanning a roughly twenty-year period from 1988 until 2007.¹⁶ We like to think that this plethora of genres would have amused Beauvoir who herself wrote in a variety of genres. The work of fourteen directors is represented: four American, four French, two British, one Danish-German, one Franco-Chilean, one German and one Italian, comprising eight male directors and six female directors.¹⁷ As we write this introduction in late 2011 there are some grounds for optimism – at least within France – that women directors are continuing to shape the direction of cinema. An article appearing in *The Guardian* in March 2011 hailed ‘France’s female new wave’ directors: Mia Hansen-Løve, Rebecca Zlotowski and Katell Quillévéré, with the latter declaring that cinema is a ‘liberation process’ (Poirier 2011). In this respect, Laura Gragg observes: ‘These women film directors offer better and stronger parts to actresses, and their films have contributed to changing the way we consider women, not women as girls but women as individuals’.¹⁸ Similarly, in opening a dialogue between Beauvoirian philosophy and contemporary film, as editors, we foreground not only Beauvoir’s importance as the inaugural theorist of feminist film studies but also the continuing relevance of her thought to the liberatory potential of cinema.¹⁹

Notes

1. For example, among other survey works in the field, there is just one brief reference to Beauvoir’s work on myth in relation to cinema in Thornham (1999: 10). Similarly Shohini Chaudhuri (2006) positions Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* as heralding second-wave feminism but she does not discuss Beauvoir’s work on the gendered gaze, myth or stardom in cinema.
2. A feature of her analysis of woman’s situation as ‘absolute other’ in patriarchal society, Beauvoir’s theory of the gendered gaze is predominantly located in *The Second Sex* (1949) and also in *Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome* (1959). It is also illustrated in her novels, especially *She Came to Stay* (1943) and *Les Belles Images* (1966).
3. For instance Beauvoir remarks upon the use of fake colours by Vadim which allows him to flash ‘a number of “high spots” in which all the sensuality of the film is concentrated’ and this discontinuity ‘heightens the aggressive character of BB’s femininity’ (1960: 44). For Beauvoir, Vadim’s abstract style places the spectator as a voyeur.
4. See for example Sellier (2005) and Burch and Sellier (2009).
5. ‘Ecriture féminine’ emerged in France during the post-1968 period of second-wave feminism and was a form of literary practice theorised by Hélène Cixous and associated with ‘Psychanalyse et politique’, a faction within the French feminist movement. Cixous sought to theorise the difference of female subjectivity beyond the constraints of phallogocentrism (a term, derived from Jacques Derrida, coined from ‘phallogocentrism’ or privileging the phallus as dominant signifier and ‘logocentrism’ or privileging the word

- as a means to full truth and presence). Phallogocentrism refers to the privileging of patriarchy through language and representation and acts as a means to maintain the political hegemony of patriarchy; see Cixous (1976) and Moi (1987).
6. For a more detailed overview of Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, see 'Becoming Woman' in Tidd (2004), pp. 49–70.
 7. For an overview of the issues concerning the two translations of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, see Simons (1999), Glazer (2004) and Moi (2010).
 8. See, for example, French materialist feminist Christine Delphy's discussion of the ideological invention of 'French Feminism' by Anglophone scholars as being predominantly concerned with psychoanalytic and linguistic approaches to sexual difference (1995:190–221). In Toril Moi's 1987 anthology *French Feminist Thought*, she noted that the muted reception of French materialist feminism was the result of their work being 'less frequently translated and less well-known precisely because of their relative similarity: they have ... been perceived as lacking in exotic difference'. Indeed, Beauvoir's antipathy towards psychoanalysis as a theoretical base from which to think about gender, her rejection of poststructuralist concepts of the subject and her persistent focus on the material and phenomenological aspects of sexual oppression in *Le Deuxième Sexe* have only latterly been understood as a powerful alternative to what many Anglophone scholars perceived in the 1970s and 1980s as 'French feminist theory'.
 9. See Mayne (1985: 82).
 10. See Chaudhuri (2006: 29).
 11. Leading feminist film critic Ginette Vincendeau is one of very few to have analysed Beauvoir's essay in this regard; see her forthcoming book on Brigitte Bardot.
 12. Our thanks to Darren Waldron for this observation.
 13. For a brief discussion of Beauvoir's interest in dance and embodiment, see Fishwick (2002: 253–63).
 14. See for example Sobchack (1991, 2004), Marks (2000) and Barker (2009).
 15. Although there is a common misconception that Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity* is 'the most likely formulation of an ethics one could draw from *Being and Nothingness*'; see Pamerleau (2009: 30).
 16. Strictly speaking, it starts in 1955 with *All That Heaven Allows* but the main film under study in this essay is the 2002 postmodern melodrama from Todd Haynes, *Far From Heaven* (see chapter five).
 17. The Cannes film festival attracted controversy as recently as 2010 for not shortlisting a single woman film director – see Shoard and Millward (2010) – although this is a different issue. This is about the critical establishment and whether they are prepared to acknowledge the women who have been working in cinema for a long time. The latter adds: 'There have been 212 films in competition in Cannes since 2000, and only 17 (by 14 women) have had a look in'.
 18. Laura Gragg is an American production consultant living in Paris, former deputy head of ACE, a network of European producers.
 19. A parallel volume on Sartre was published in 2011; see Boulé and McCaffrey (2011).

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